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ROJAVA AT 4

EXAMINING THE EXPERIMENT IN WESTERN KURDISTAN

Workshop Proceedings

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Executive Summary

In July 2012, Kurds in northern Syria began taking control of territory. This led to the creation of the largely self-governing areas known collectively as Rojava (Western Kurdistan), and a new experiment in local government which has deep significance for Syrian, Kurdish, Middle Eastern and international geopolitics. Four years on from this unprecedented development, the LSE Middle East Centre convened a workshop on 19 July 2016 to examine the progress and nature of the Rojava project. Nine specialists on Kurdish, Syrian and Turkish politics presented short papers and contributed to rich discussions over the day. Colleagues from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development also made valuable contributions. The healthy level of debate was testament to the complexity and nuance of the issues and this report seeks to introduce the key themes which emerged and provide new insights into Rojava.

The workshop was split into four sessions. The first sought to understand Rojava through analysis of the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (Democratic Union Party, PYD) and its party complex, the new political and social architecture, and the structure and operations of its armed force, the *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (People's Defence Units, YPG). The second session examined the parties of the other Kurdish faction, the Kurdistan National Council (KNC), Rojava's relationship to the Syrian regime and its engagement with other Syrian actors.

The third session moved north to consider the ambitions held for Rojava by the *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK), which is the mother party of the PYD, and also Turkish scenarios for dealing with its Rojava problem. The final session explored Rojava's activities and relationships in the wider international arena. This report provides a distillation of the presentations and discussions.

Understanding Rojava

The PYD has unilaterally created Rojava and established itself as the dominant force in Kurdish areas. Understanding the party is therefore central to understanding its political construct. The PYD's origins lie in the decision made by the PKK to broaden its support for the Kurdish struggle beyond Turkey to the whole region. Building on earlier support for the PKK among some Kurds in Syria, the PYD was founded in 2003 as the Syrian branch of the movement and has since been transformed from a fringe offshoot of the PKK to the leading Kurdish party in Syria. The PYD was not founded or developed with any expectation of gaining power. Rather, it has shown remarkable opportunism and organisation to exploit the war in Syria and to implement its programme. It is notable that the first attempt to put Abdullah Öcalan's ideas of democratic confederalism into practice is occurring in Syria, a country not previously to the fore of Kurdish political development.

The PYD's relationship to its mother party is a defining and pervasive feature of Rojava. Its claim that the PKK's influence is fraternal and ideological, but without operational aspects, is unlikely to be accurate. Instead, this relationship remains unclear and is

contested through three broad theories: shadowy PKK figures tell the PYD what to do; the PYD makes the decisions, but with PKK help; and some PYD members are tired of PKK interference and are struggling against this.

The PYD's structure as a political party is very clearly laid out and the party is proud of its highly consultative nature. For example, rules state that decisions must be agreed by two thirds of party members. Whether this system functions as such is another matter, not least because of the problematic question of the relationship with the PKK. The PYD claims that it is but one political party within a broader socio-political movement known as TEV-DEM (Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk, Movement for a Democratic Society), but in practice the distinction between the two is vague.

Another problematic aspect of the PYD project is the party's inclination towards authoritarianism. The PYD denies this – or pleads for understanding in conditions of war – but its inability, or refusal, to work with the many other Kurdish parties in Syria has contributed to polarisation and tension. As Rojava continues to strengthen, it is possible this will increase. Alternatively, as the PYD takeover becomes complete, its opponents may become reconciled to the project as the only viable option for Kurds, though this may also encourage further PYD domination.

Despite the emphasis on the political and social achievements of the popular movement, the PYD and Rojava would not have been successful without the victories of the YPG. While many Syrian Kurds had fought with the PKK or with the Kurds in Iraq, there was no history of armed Kurdish insurgency in Syria until the civil war. Some groundwork was laid from 2007, when the ceasefire in Turkey allowed the PKK more time to focus on the movement in Syria. Since the 'Rojava revolution' began in July 2012, the YPG has steadily conducted the 'liberation' of Kurdish areas when it took control of Kobane, followed by Afrin and some towns in the Jazira.

The YPG's successful defence of Kobane against Islamic State (IS) in 2014–2015 has proved highly significant as it forced the US to start providing military support to the Kurds, demonstrated the ability of the YPG, and provided a powerful rallying point for the Kurdish movement. Subsequent military gains have enabled the spread of Rojava across two contiguous cantons, with the YPG now emboldened to try to link the third in the west and create an enlarged and unbroken Rojava across the length of northern Syria. The current military operation to take the town of Manbij from IS is crucial to this plan and is about to succeed.

However, this push further westwards is frowned upon by the US, whose support or disapproval is important to the YPG. The decision in 2015 to create the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a larger coalition of militias which includes non-Kurds but is dominated by the YPG, was a clear attempt to win international backing and to calm the fears of Arabs and other groups in northern Syria of a Kurdish takeover. The move, however, was not purely cynical packaging, as there are non-Kurdish forces fighting within the SDF, including an Arab militia taking part in the Manbij operation. The Arab brigades include tribes with old relationships to the PYD, those expelled from Raqqa by IS who are seeking revenge, and groups created by the US who have been forced to join.

The YPG may be a stronger actor than the PYD; it certainly appears to have more popular support as the defender of Kurdish communities. Not all members of the YPG follow PYD ideology. Another notable aspect of the YPG is the presence of Kurdish fighters from Turkey and Iran. This may be causing some tensions in Rojava. There is also a new phenomenon of Kurds from Turkey who are not members of the PKK crossing the border to fight for the YPG. The extent to which PKK fighters control the YPG is not agreed but it is clear that Syrian Kurdish veterans of the PKK have fought for the YPG and it is possible, based on YPG casualty data, that 50 percent of its fighters could be Turkish based. With around 50,000 fighters, the YPG is now much larger than the PKK's 8,000-member armed wing.

The Kurdistan National Council Parties

The parties of the KNC, the older Kurdish political movement in Syria, have fallen into the shadow of the PYD. By 2011, the KNC parties were already losing popular support due to societal changes and the compelling narrative of the PYD has created a blinkered view of Kurdish politics in Syria. The PYD insists that other parties recognise its system, effectively making the opposing KNC parties illegal, exactly as they had been under the Ba'ath regime. The PYD's restrictions and harassment expose the shortfalls in democracy in the Rojava system. The pressure to sign up to the PYD project has split the KNC and some of its parties have switched sides and committed to Rojava.

Despite their weakness, the KNC parties remain relevant. Within Kurdish society, the KNC has taken on the important role of opposition to the PYD's rule, in which issues including forced conscription, conscription of minors and arbitrary arrest have emerged. In the wider Syrian and international field, it is positioned in support of the Syrian uprising and has an important role to play in the Syrian National Council (SNC) in ensuring Kurds are represented and the question of the status of Kurdish areas is properly considered. However, their relationship with the SNC is still uncomfortable as the latter is often hostile to Kurdish interests and opposes Kurdish autonomy. This could force the KNC to leave the SNC and seek agreement with the PYD. Kurds of both factions feel there should be a Kurdish delegation in the peace talks, in addition to the SNC, as they form a national group rather than a political party.

The KNC is stuck between the PYD and the SNC, with no likelihood of improving either relationship. It is focussing its efforts on internationalising its role and gaining legitimacy. The KNC has also added federalism as a demand alongside constitutional recognition of Kurdish identity. However, its version of federalism differs from that of the PYD in that it is ethnic rather than democratic confederal and would not be unilaterally imposed. Instead, the KNC aims for a binding international agreement that guarantees federalism alongside Kurdish rights. The KNC is backed by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq that hosts the KNC's militia, the 'Rojava Peshmerga', which the PYD views as a rival and will not allow to enter Syria.

Relations between Rojava and Damascus

The relationship between the PKK and the Syrian regime dates back to the 1980s when Hafez al-Assad provided sanctuary to the movement. In 2003, Syrian intelligence watched as Syrian PKK supporters they were familiar with reconstituted themselves as the PYD. After the Kurdish unrest and deaths in 2004, the two sides agreed new dynamics of communication to avoid future violence. In 2011, under pressure from the popular uprising, Bashar al-Assad made some overtures to Kurds, including granting citizenship to the large group of stateless people. In July 2012, the YPG took control of some Kurdish towns the day after the regime was rocked by a serious bomb attack in Damascus. At the time, the PYD opposed foreign intervention but wanted regime change.

The regime's mentality is focussed on security as much as politics and this has influenced its approach to Rojava. It kept security forces in Qamishli as arrangements developed ad hoc, government salaries continued to be paid by Damascus, and services were still provided by the Syrian state. The regime-PYD relationship is a marriage of convenience which has a very rocky existence, as seen in fatal clashes in Qamishli in April 2016. After the trouble, the regime sent senior people to talk to the PYD who agreed to let the regime operate unmolested in defined areas.

As both the regime and the PYD became increasingly threatened by Jabhat al-Nusra and IS, their mutual cooperation increased and this continues in patches. For example, there is close coordination in Sheikh Maqsood in Aleppo against Jabhat al-Nusra and other groups, while there is a smaller regime presence in Kobane and Afrin. The most important factor on the ground is who is killing whom on a certain day.

There are two main views in Damascus of the Kurdish project. The first is that Syria will return to being a centralised state and Rojava will disappear. Bashar Jaafari, a hardliner, has stated that Saleh Muslim (the Co-Chair of the PYD) can leave Syria when Rojava is abolished. Another regime view is looking at decentralisation more broadly as a possible model for holding the state together. As the ruling group is from the Alawi minority, the value is apparent. In both views, Damascus largely ignores the political developments and grand claims made in Rojava. The international exclusion of the PYD has only benefitted the regime. However, there is a greater risk of a clash between the regime and Rojava if the hardliners in Damascus win. The fate of the town of Manbij is again very significant.

Rojava and the Opposition in Syria

Relations between the PYD and the opposition in Syria are poor and complicated. The fall of the regime is a much lower priority for the PYD than for the rebels. The only reason the rebels and the PYD are not fighting much is because the rebels lack the capacity to open another front, but more bloody fights are probable. Despite this, a war economy and

trade between all sides exist and will continue. The PYD and IS are the best-structured and organised of the actors in northern Syria, competing for resources as well as territory and power.

Arab tribes in the north are divided and are neither totally pro- or anti-PYD. Rebels in Hasakah see the spread of Rojava as a PYD invasion. There is a historical legacy of tensions between Kurds and Arabs, with micro-conflicts on the ground having deep historical and tribal elements, such as the settling of scores from a 1934 land dispute in Ras al-Ayn.

Events in Tel Abyad in 2015 are instructive for the PYD's approach to areas with high Arab populations. The PYD imposed its own governance structure after Kurdish forces captured the town from IS. An attempt was made to negotiate for a 65 percent Arab quota as representative of the population, but the PYD refused and Tel Abyad was joined to the Kobane canton. Many Arabs feel treated as second class citizens in PYD areas, considered guilty of supporting IS until proven otherwise. What happens after Manbij falls is therefore very important; will the PYD allow the local rebels to govern themselves?

The Importance of Rojava for the PKK

It is essential to consider the PKK's ideology and political plan in order to understand developments in Rojava. The party proposes a system of democracy which exists in parallel to state structures. This is non-territorial based, although it involves territorial control. It is non-ethnic and is organised through the communities. The PKK argues for 'demoi-cracy', democracy of many different people, rather than one, through democratic autonomy. To them, it is not a question of states, but of popular democracies. Since 2010, the PKK has moved away from demanding an independent state for Kurds, proclaiming that many groups can co-exist within the same entity and democratic autonomy.

The developments in the Kurdish conflict in Syria are seen by the PKK as part of a gradual move towards transforming the Kurdish conflicts in Turkey and finding a peaceful resolution. The implementation of democratic autonomy and self-rule in Rojava provides a base to influence political developments in Turkey and, in the long-term, to build a regional consensus on securing Kurdish rights.

The PKK believes that the Kurdish entity in Syria will contribute positively to the resolution of problems in Turkey, as Turkey cannot continue to repress Kurdish culture and rights. It also believes these solutions should be applied to the Kurdish questions throughout the whole region, including Iran. The PKK wants Kurdish national unity within a hybrid structure, rather than nation states.

A great weakness of the Kurdish movement in Turkey has been its lack of international support. If the international community engages with Rojava, which then gains legitimacy, it will anchor the PKK more firmly in the pro-democracy and moderate camp. This would give the PKK complex the chance to network with bigger powers and better influence regional players.

The idea of democratic autonomy was previously sneered at. Now, there is an example which can work in practice, hence the PKK's argument across Kurdish communities and political debates is strengthened. Miracles cannot be expected in Rojava where there is a desperate fight against IS' genocidal campaign. But there are clear signs of resilience and positivity, including the increase in non-Kurdish representation and promotion of gender equality.

Turkey's Rojava Problem

For Turkey, Rojava is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional issue. Turkey's policies towards the Kurds in Syria are utterly inseparable from Turkish domestic Kurdish policies, as are the two Kurdish populations. The Turkish state has a strong historical tradition of seeing any Kurdish polity as a threat to its own Kurdish issue. The PKK and its allies pose a threat to the security and territorial unity of the republic and this is the key factor ahead of all. This doctrine is institutionalised and is not questioned.

Turkey sees three terrorist groups as threats: hard leftists, Islamists and the PKK. Hence, it is very natural to expand this definition to include the PYD, which is part of the PKK monster. The PKK is fundamentally seen as the greatest challenge and its ideology of a parallel political and social structure is very scary. Turkey defines terrorism in a way that it can use expansively and apply broadly to extend beyond active PKK members. There are some similarities to its concern over the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in the 1990s but Kurdistan-Syria is different because of the involvement of the PKK. The KRI became a digestible Kurdish option because of its enmity to the PKK.

Turkey sees the growth of Kurdish power across its south and south-east borders as a threat to its integrity and is suspicious of foreign scheming to undermine its authority. Turkey has so far made a huge investment in opposing Assad, which is hard to give up. However, the Turkish attempt to equate the PYD with the PKK and delegitimise it internationally has failed. In the aftermath of the botched coup in July 2016 and IS attacks inside Turkey, the Turkish army was ordered into northern Syria. The operation was ostensibly against IS but clearly also aimed to curb the gains made by the Kurds.

Four scenarios may be laid out for Turkey in dealing with its Rojava problem:

- Invasion or military operation to extinguish Rojava: The current military intervention is a blow to Rojava, but it is not fatal. A much deeper Turkish assault is unlikely because international support would not be forthcoming, the Syrian war is too complex and Turkish domestic issues are too challenging. It would likely draw Turkey into long and difficult fight with the PKK/YPG inside Syria and would also cause an escalation of the conflict inside Turkey. It could also cause large scale displacement of the Kurdish population in Syria.
- Wiping out the PKK, Rojava will then collapse: Turkey is not likely to eliminate the PKK. However, its fight against the group is further destabilising Turkish domestic politics. This is the option Turkey currently chooses.

- Coming to terms with Rojava: This scenario is not compatible with Turkey's security doctrine.
- The Syrian war ends with an international peace deal: This would have to include the Kurds. The Turkish response will be negative, refusing to accept a Kurdish entity and it will scupper the PYD's involvement. Turkey's position will delay the chance of a Syrian peace deal.

Rojava in the International Arena

Despite its remarkable gains, Rojava is highly fragile and desperately short of friends. All other actors in Syria are hostile, as are the KRI and Turkey. In such a deeply hostile neighbourhood, any support Rojava can gain internationally is vital. Hence the emerging autonomous region has made notable efforts to craft and spread a narrative which appeals to international governments and publics.

The narrative promoted by the PYD has two themes. The first is that of the wicked enemies of Rojava. Under this, Rojava is the heroic underdog fighting for the survival of the Kurdish minority against overwhelming and rather evil enemies. Rojava was established only for self-defence but now offers protection. It is easy to depict IS within this narrative and it plays well to Western ears.

The 6-month siege and victory over IS in Kobane in 2014–2015 was momentous as it changed the Kurdish narrative to heroic martyrdom and, rarely in the Kurdish movement, to one of victory. It also transformed Rojava's relations with the West, especially the US, and proved it could be a useful ally.

Turkey shares an equally negative status for Rojava, and is consistently condemned for its hostility to peaceful, democracy-loving Kurds and in particular for supporting IS. The Assad regime is vicious and illegitimate and the Syrian opposition is led by expatriates motivated by personal ambition who do not support democracy. The KRI does not help Kurds as it is in the pocket of Turkey.

The second theme is Rojava's self-narrative of its wholesome alternative as democratic, popular, secular, gender-equal and well organised. The PYD is acutely aware of the question of Kurdish ethnic domination of northern Syria and boasts of its inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities, quotas and official language status for Arabic and Syriac. The appearance of 'Northern Syria' in the name of the autonomous region is part of this effort to downplay its Kurdishness, as is the creation of the SDF as a multi-sectarian force worthy of international backing, especially given the alternatives. And in 2016 the movement's international representation is being officially separated into PYD and Rojava offices.

There is also, interestingly, a strong emphasis on loyalty to Syria and claims of Syrian patriotism. This is wholly compatible with the ideology of democratic autonomy which is intended to be of benefit to all peoples, not just Kurds.

For Western states, there lies a conflict between the imperative to stop IS and acute sensitivities to Turkey. There are many reasons for Western hesitation, like the importance of the use of Turkish air bases. The lines of Syria's existing borders should not be endangered by an autonomous movement. The US and EU powers oppose the unilateral actions of the PYD and its distance from the Syrian Arab opposition. The West also criticises the PYD for its authoritarian behaviour and prefers to sponsor the KNC, which is a member of the SNC, recognised by them as the legitimate representation of the Syrian people since 2012.

However, Rojava has become attractive to international powers operating in the Syrian war. Most importantly for Western states and Russia, it is proving effective against IS. The tipping point for the West was the battle for Kobane which halted IS at a time it appeared unstoppable. The US and its allies continued to carry out supportive air strikes and there is currently a small but apparently growing US military presence in Kurdish areas coordinating the support and providing advice.

In addition, Rojava offers a model of government much more in sympathy with Western ideals than any alternative operating in Syria. The PKK is on Western terrorist lists but the PYD is not and despite Turkish pressure, not likely to be. Russia, so far free from Turkish pressure, is Rojava's strongest international state supporter. Russia does not publically back Kurdish ambitions but pushes harder for PYD inclusion in Syria's peace talks.

Concluding Points

In May 2016, the SDF launched an offensive to capture the strategically significant town of Manbij from Islamic State. By early August, they were in control of most of the town. Many of the questions thrown up by the four years of the Rojava experiment are reflected in this military operation and its political outcome.

One of these is the extent of the PYD's commitment to inclusiveness and power sharing with the large non-Kurdish communities of northern Syria. Manbij is a majority Arab town and Arab fighters in the SDF are leading the attack. The US, which is supporting the operation, intends that Arabs will govern the town after its fall. However, the YPG and PYD may impose a council of their own choosing as they did in Tel Abyad. The PYD's refusal to accommodate the Kurdish parties of the KNC is consistent with its determination to maximise any power it can take. A stronger Rojava could cause further authoritarianism and polarisation among Kurds.

Related to this is the key question of the growth of Rojava into a contiguous territory. The gaps between the three pockets of Kurdish-majority areas have been a weakness of Western Kurdistan. Two have been joined through the success of the YPG and there is an obvious desire to connect the third. This would mean absorbing more non-Kurds into Rojava and establish it as a solid block on the map of Syria. The deep tensions in the relationship between Rojava and the Ba'athist regime are also visible in Manbij. Kurdish expansion into the corridor to the east of Aleppo would not be welcomed by Damascus as it eyes an ever more entrenched rival administration.

A contiguous federal region of Rojava would run along the vast majority of Turkey's border with Syria. Turkey would furiously oppose this expansion on its southern flank but its options to intervene appear limited, other than by increasing pressure on its allies. The awkwardness of the position for the US and its partners would be even more exposed as they attempt to defeat IS while keeping the PYD in check. Greater foreign dialogue with the PYD could prove useful in reinforcing messages of the actions it should take, and there are signs that the PYD is receptive to this.

Whatever the developments after the Manbij offensive, the question of the constitutional relationship between Kurdish communities and the Syrian state is pressing. There cannot be a peaceful settlement in Syria without the inclusion of its Kurdish population. Despite the difficulties presented by Syrian opposition to federalism and the complications of Syria's make-up, mechanisms need to be examined for a constitutional agreement with the autonomous area within the eventual settlement.

Abbreviations

IS	Islamic State
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KNC	Kurdistan National Council
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
PYD	Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNC	Syrian National Council
TEV-DEM	Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk (Movement for a Democratic Society)
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Defence Units)

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Cover image: A Kurdish man guards a checkpoint on the road to the northwestern Syrian city of Afrin, August 2012. © ARIS MESSINIS/AFP/Getty Images.

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